

**THE REFLECTIVE ESSAY AS A METACOGNITIVE TOOL IN
PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS**

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The study attempts to show evidence of metacognitive thinking among first-year college students of De La Salle University – Manila. 128 portfolios from 32 sections of English One were selected for the study. Three reflective essays from each of the portfolios were read, and passages showing metacognitive knowledge or experience were identified by the researcher and two interraters. The passages were further classified into personal, task and strategy variables, based on the Metacognitive Model of John Flavell (1985). From the study, it is evident that the metacognitive knowledge of the students is both experiential and cognitive. The most outstanding is the strategy variable, and students' reflections show ample evidence of planning, monitoring and evaluation of their work, even without previous training. Their facility with the language may translate into their ability to express their reflections in writing. However, to further improve students' metacognitive skills and critical thinking, conscious training in the classroom may prove beneficial.

1. Introduction

In the past, traditional standardized multiple-choice tests were used in the English classrooms. In the United States, minimum competency testing programs were implemented in the 1970s, and "high stakes" were increasingly attached to scores.

However, during the late 1980s, educational policy-makers and reformers became disillusioned with this model of testing. Many teachers "taught to the test" or tailored their instruction to suit the contents of the tests and engaged in forms of coaching. These forms of coaching often resulted in excessive drills, reliance on multiple-choice tests for internal assessment, use of instructional materials that resembled test prompts, and a de-emphasis of important material not stressed in the tests (Koretz, 1998).

Since then, at least three less conventional forms of assessment have been implemented on a limited scale in the U.S., namely, hands-on performance tasks, hybrid group/individual assessments, and portfolio assessment (Koretz, 1998).

The latter has gained widespread popularity in education because it seems to have tremendous advantages over traditional one-time objective-based assessment. Objective-based assessment focuses only on the product and limits the learner's ability to demonstrate the learning process. It forces the learners to focus on what the teacher deems important.

On the other hand, the portfolio is a purposeful collection of work that exhibits the learner's efforts, progress and achievements. In the course of learning, the portfolio becomes a kind of autobiography of growth. By learning to organize his/her learning experiences and sharing them with others, the learner is able to get a deeper understanding of himself/herself (Jarvinen & Kohonen, 1995).

Thus, traditional assessment is a "moment in time glimpse" of a learner's ability to perform a task or set of tasks. On the other hand, portfolio assessment allows learners to chart their progress and highlight their individual achievements (Herman & Morrell, 1999).

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This alternative form of assessment marks a change from teacher-centered to student-centered learning since the students are given the chance to assess themselves through the opportunities of formulating rubrics. Portfolio assessment also challenges students to develop vital critical thinking skills through the selection of the work that best demonstrates the learning experience they underwent in a particular course (Herman & Morrell, 1999).

Tierney, Carter and Desai (1991, p. 43) specify the differences in assessment processes and outcomes between portfolios and standardized testing practices:

| Portfolio Assessment | Standardized Testing |
|--|--|
| Students are assessed on a range of reading and writing activities. | Students are assessed on reading and writing assignments which may not match their activities. |
| Students are engaged in assessing their own progress and/or accomplishments. | The teachers alone score. |
| Each student's achievement is measured, allowing for individual differences. | All students are assessed on the same dimensions. |
| Approach to assessment is collaborative. | Approach to assessment is individual. |
| Student self-assessment is a goal. | Student self-assessment is not considered. |
| Improvement, effort and achievement are addressed. | Only achievement is addressed. |
| Assessment is linked with teaching and learning | Learning, testing and teaching are separate. |

Student self-assessment, therefore, is one of the major principles underlying portfolio use. Portfolios do not merely store students' work. Instead, students are involved in self-assessment as they organize their portfolios, select and arrange their materials, reflect upon what they have achieved, and critique their own work (Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991).

Reflection is thus a vital component of portfolio assessment and reflective writing provides the student with a systematic approach to his/her development as a reflective, critical and constructive learner.

Three studies pertaining to portfolio assessment and learner reflection may be cited. One teacher documents her experiences in using the portfolio assessment in a Japanese university, another, with a group of 10th grade students in a Portuguese high school, and the other, in an intermediate EFL classroom in Saudi Arabia.

The first teacher writes that her Japanese students were often daunted by the reflective task in doing their portfolios. They did not readily grasp the procedure and purpose of reflection. They would seek help in completing tasks that call for an opinion of their own work and learning. For some students, the problem was linguistic since they lacked communicative skills to express their thoughts in English. For others, the problem was metacognitive since some of them had few opportunities to develop and express their thoughts about learning.

Davidson (1995) (cited in Santos (1997) observes that heavy emphasis on memorization for multiple-choice entrance examinations in Japan hampers students' ability to analyze or think deeply about classroom topics. For them, analyzing and organizing their reflective thoughts for a portfolio poses a challenge (Santos, 1997). The study suggests some reflective tasks that could be undertaken in the classroom to develop metacognitive ability.

Another case study by Alabdelwahab (2002) examines the introduction of the self-assessment portfolio as a method of assessment in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes at the Manarat Al-Sharqiah Intermediate School in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia. The purpose of the study was to examine students' teachers' and school administrators' reactions to the use of a non-indigenous (Western) assessment methodology. Data analysis revealed that most students enjoyed using self-assessment portfolios. Most of them found the process of reflecting on one's own learning to be helpful in identifying their strengths and weaknesses. The EFL teachers and administrators also endorsed the self-assessment portfolio as worthy of future consideration. Both portfolio and interview data suggest that the self-assessment method encourages students to adopt patterns of critical thinking and motivates students to learn. The writer suggests, however, that any introduction of non-indigenous educational methods would first require that the latter be modified and adapted to conform to the values of Islam (Alabdelwahab, 2002).

The third study of portfolios in the EFL classroom was carried out over a period of one year with a group of 10th grade students in a Portuguese high school. The objectives of the study were to find out how the records of student reflection in the portfolios could contribute to a more informed approach to the teaching/learning process and promote a deeper involvement of the students in their learning.

In spite of the fact that these students had been attending high school for four years, they were obviously not used to thinking about their learning and were at a loss in the task of reflection. For this particular study, the students wrote their reflections in the target language and not in their mother tongue, a fact which might be considered as an added burden to an already demanding task.

In order to help the students, the researcher used questionnaires related to their learning process, such as what they learned in a particular class, the difficulties they found, among others. The students were also given explicit training in learning strategies, such as describing, modeling and illustrating the strategies they used to solve particular tasks as well as presenting, describing and providing practice in using new strategies (Nunes, 2004).

Although the majority of the portfolios produced by the students illustrated idiosyncrasies of their authors and uniqueness (Se'-Chaves, 1998 in Nunes, 2004), they also showed commonality as far as the focus of their reflection was concerned, though their language and substance were different.

The students' reflections revealed different levels of complexity, from a more elementary level of thought to a higher level of metacognition. The reflections that focused on the students' learning provided the teacher with a better understanding of their preferred learning styles, needs and difficulties. Above all, the students' reflections about learning were found to be helpful in developing their ability to become autonomous learners. The study shows that when students are able to accurately identify weaknesses in their learning, they can more promptly and accurately self-monitor their learning process and take appropriate action to overcome these shortcomings (Nunes, 2004).

A journal article also documents a study focusing on the metacognitive growth of ESL student writers in Kingsborough Community College/CUNY. The study attempted to clarify the relationship between metacognition and ESL writing performance. It offers both quantitative (statistical) and qualitative (protocol) data to support the hypothesis that there is a significant positive correlation between ESL students' metacognitive growth and their

actual performance in a final writing assessment. Students who were successful in the final writing assessment obtained higher ratings on all three metacognitive variables (personal, task and strategy). Results suggest that if metacognitive growth is a goal of writing instruction, one must provide guidance in recognizing and practice in applying strategies during the early levels of English language instruction (Kasper, 1997).

In the Philippines, the use of portfolios in the English classroom has been gathering momentum. Some educational institutions in the private sector have adopted this alternative form of assessment, particularly at the secondary level. In the public sector, the Department of Education has also endorsed its use. However, in the universities, traditional forms of assessment are still prevalent.

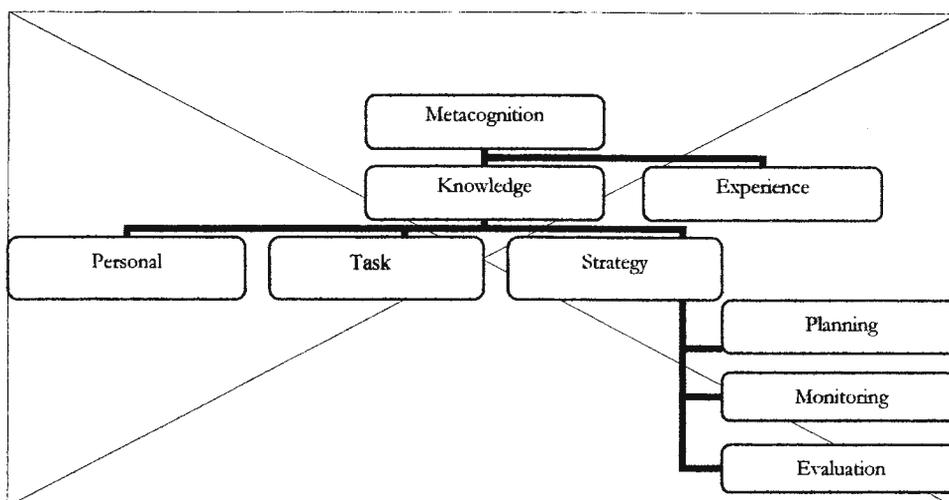
Plata (2005), in a related study, explored the role of self-regulatory prompts in enhancing metacognitive knowledge of first year composition students. Through modeling and prompting, the teacher guided the students in goal-setting, self-monitoring and self-evaluation before, during and after particular learning tasks. The results of the study show that the prompts enabled the students to monitor their thinking and to enhance their knowledge of self and of the strategies they used. Her conclusion suggests that metacognition is evident in their journal entries which were used as corpus for her study,

In a study by Borromeo (1998), the effects of metacognitive learning strategies on the reading comprehension of Third Year High School students were investigated. Two groups of students (the control groups) were taught conventional strategies for reading, while two other groups (experimental groups) were taught metacognitive strategies. The groups were composed of readers with low and high abilities. Her findings show that the experimental groups with low abilities in reading had higher scores in the test than those with similar abilities in the control groups, and those with high abilities in the experimental groups showed improvement in their scores compared to their counterparts in the control groups. Both groups were given pre- and post-tests in reading to compare their scores. Her conclusion shows that metacognitive strategies may be a factor in improving the reading comprehension of Filipino high school students.

This study is an attempt to analyze the reflective essays written by first-year students of De La Salle University – Manila as part of the contents of their portfolios. It seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Do the reflective essays show evidence of metacognitive thinking on the part of the students?
2. Which of the metacognitive variables (personal, task or strategy) are evident in the students' reflective essays?
3. To what extent do these variables show their ability to assess their own strengths and weaknesses as English learners?
4. What methods can be employed to enhance their metacognitive thinking?

To answer these questions, the Metacognitive Model of Flavell (1987) was adapted as a framework:



Source: Flavell, J. (1987). *Cognitive development* (2nd ed.). N J: Prentice-Hall.

Metacognition is often simply defined as “thinking about thinking”. It refers to higher order thinking that involves active control over the cognitive processes engaged in learning. According to Flavell (1987), metacognition consists of both metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive experience or regulation. Flavell further divides metacognitive knowledge into three categories: personal variables, task variables and strategy variables. Devine (1993) cited in Kasper (1997) believes a good learner is “one who has ample metacognitive knowledge about self as learner, about the nature of the cognitive task at hand, and about appropriate strategies for achieving cognitive goals” (p. 109).

Knowledge of person variables refers to general knowledge about how human beings learn and process information, as well as individual knowledge of one’s own learning processes. Knowledge of task variables includes knowledge about the nature of the task, as well as the type of processing demands that it will place upon the individual. Knowledge about strategy variables includes knowledge about both cognitive and metacognitive strategies and the techniques in learning their appropriate use. Metacognitive strategies are sequential processes that one uses to control cognitive activities and to ensure that a cognitive goal (e.g. understanding a text) has been met. These processes consist of planning and monitoring cognitive activities, as well as evaluating outcomes (Livingston, 1997).

2. Methodology

To discover whether English One students of De La Salle University – Manila show evidence of metacognitive thinking, the reflective essays included in their portfolios were analyzed. Four portfolios were randomly selected from 10 submitted by each English One teacher at the end of the first term of school year 2004-2005. A total of 128 portfolios from 32 sections were selected for this study. Three reflective essays from each of the portfolios were read, and passages showing metacognitive knowledge or experience were identified. From these passages were drawn personal, task or strategy variables. The strategy variables were analyzed and classified as planning, monitoring or evaluating strategies. Two English One teachers, aside from the researcher, were asked to identify and classify the passages, and a consensus among the three was reached. The findings were then tabulated, and a qualitative descriptive analysis and interpretation of the variables was done.

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Table 1 shows the breakdown of the number of portfolios and reflective essays included in the study:

Table 1. Reflective essays included in the study

| Teacher | No. of sections | No. of portfolios | No. of reflective essays |
|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| 2 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| 3 | 2 | 8 | 24 |
| 4 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| 5 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| 6 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| 7 | 2 | 8 | 24 |
| 8 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| 9 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| 10 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| 11 | 2 | 8 | 24 |
| 12 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| 13 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| 14 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| 15 | 2 | 8 | 24 |
| 16 | 2 | 8 | 24 |
| 17 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| 18 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| 19 | 2 | 8 | 24 |
| 20 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| 21 | 2 | 8 | 24 |
| 22 | 2 | 8 | 24 |
| 23 | 2 | 8 | 24 |
| Total | 32 | 128 | 384 |

A total of 384 essays were read and analyzed. Three reflective essays were included in each portfolio; one was written at the beginning of the course, while two essays were written at the end of the course. Passages were then identified as either experiential or cognitive; the cognitive passages were further analyzed, and the variables were classified into personal, task or strategy variables.

3. Results

Table 2 shows the general classification of the passages:

Table 2. Kinds of metacognitive knowledge

| No. of Passages | Experiential | Cognitive |
|-----------------|--------------|-----------|
| 271 | 11 – 4% | 260 – 96% |

After an examination/analysis of the passages, the three raters reached a consensus. Only 11 or 4% of the passages were purely experiential; the rest, 260 or 96%, showed cognitive knowledge of the person, task and strategy, as shown in Table 3:

Table 3. Cognitive variables in the reflective passages

| No. of passages | Person variables | Task variables | Strategy variables |
|-----------------|------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| 260 | 81 – 30% | 56 - 20% | 130 – 50% |

Strategy variables were dominant in the reflective essays of the students, although person variables and task variables were also evident. Students used a variety of strategies for planning, monitoring and evaluating their work.

Table 4 shows the person variables identified by the students in their essays:

Table 4. Person variables in the reflective passages

| Internal variables | External variables |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Awareness of the importance of craft | English Language Laboratory |
| Perseverance | Process approach |
| Acceptance of one’s mistakes | Extensive and intensive writing |
| Desire to polish and practice | Guidance in the Writing Process |

As shown in the reflective passages of the students, some variables were identified as internal or external factors, which contributed to their learning. These were the awareness of the importance of craft, perseverance, acceptance of one’s mistakes, and the desire to polish and practice their work. External factors were the English Language Laboratory and the English One course during which the students used the process approach in intensive and extensive writing, and the teacher that guided them in the writing process.

Table 5 shows the task variables identified by the students in their reflective essays.

Table 5. Task variables in the reflective passages

| Reading task | Technique | Writing task | Technique |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------------|
| Skimming and scanning | Reading faster | Outlining | |
| Getting main Idea | Identifying major and minor ideas | Paraphrasing | Expanding and elaborating ideas |
| | Formulating questions | | Enrichment |
| Critical reading | Inferring conclusions | Peer editing | Revising |
| | | | Reflecting on and correcting mistakes |
| Schema building | Internalizing learning | Reflecting | Pinpointing major ideas |
| | | Summarizing | Organizing |
| | | | Revising |
| | | Free writing | Focusing |
| | | Pre-writing | Choosing suitable ideas |

Among the reading tasks identified by the students were skimming and scanning, getting the main idea, critical reading, and schema building. Among the writing tasks were outlining, paraphrasing, peer-editing, reflective writing, summarizing, free writing, and pre-writing.

Table 6 shows the strategy variables identified by the students in their reflective essays.

Table 6. Strategy variables in the reflective passages

| Reading passages | Planning | Monitoring | Evaluating |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Consulting the dictionary | | |
| | Getting meaning from context | | |
| | Skimming and scanning | | |
| Writing passages | Outlining | Reconstruction | Use of comparison and contrast |
| | Writing under time pressure | Revision | |
| | | Rationalizing | Showing improvement in: |
| | | Analyzing | structure |
| | | Self-editing | grammar |
| | | Using criterion of truth | style |
| | | Learning to focus | organization |
| | | Use of references | sequencing |
| | | | use of transitional devices |
| | | | brevity and directness |

The strategies used by the students in planning, monitoring and evaluating their reading and writing were varied, and range from vocabulary building strategies to skimming and scanning the text before slow reading. In writing, the students mention working under time pressure, reconstruction and revision and the use of comparison and contrast, in evaluating their essays.

4. Discussion

In school year 2000-2001, the English One classes at the Department of English and Applied Linguistics of De La Salle University – Manila underwent some major changes. One of them was the decision to shift from purely traditional assessment (teacher-made tests or departmental examinations) to portfolio assessment. The primary reason for the change was the observation that the departmental examinations did not seem to measure the students’ abilities. Most of the English One teachers noted that the marks of the students considerably declined after the examination had been administered. The two-hour time limit was obviously too short to accomplish the Reading and Writing tasks called for in the examination. Selections chosen for reading were unfamiliar to the students, and the writing task could not be effectively accomplished due to the inability of the students to revise their drafts.

The Process Approach to writing had been adopted by the Department earlier; hence, students were used to undertake the pre-writing, writing and revising stages before submitting their final drafts.

The decision of the majority of the faculty in the Department was to substitute the departmental exams for the portfolio, an alternative form of assessment. With some modifications from the time it was adopted to the present, the portfolios represent the work of the students for one term.

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Contents of the portfolio are two major essays (informative and persuasive) including three drafts and outlines for each and four minor essays selected by the students themselves. Three reflective essays are also included in the portfolio. The first reflective essay given at the beginning of the course answers the following prompt:

In an essay of not less than two pages, double-spaced, evaluate yourself in terms of your ability to use the English language in spoken and written forms, as well as your ability to read and comprehend English texts critically. What are your expectations of the English One course? Do you think the course will help you in achieving your goals?

The second essay is written at the end of the course, and answers a similar prompt:

In an essay of not less than two pages, double-spaced, evaluate yourself in terms of your ability to use the English language in spoken and written forms, as well as your ability to read and comprehend English texts critically. Have your expectations from the English One course been met? What suggestions can you make to improve the course?

The two prompts call for the student's ability to assess himself/herself after taking the course for four months. It also calls for a personal evaluation of the course.

The third reflective essay gives a justification of the selection and contents of the portfolio in answer to the following prompt:

After reviewing the contents of your portfolio, discuss what goals, whether personal or academic, as projected in the syllabus, were achieved/not achieved. Don't forget to identify which of your works show that such goals have been met to your satisfaction and which of your works have allowed you to overcome the reading/writing difficulties you might have encountered.

From these reflective essays, the metacognitive elements were identified and classified as either experiential or cognitive. In the experiential element, the following extract talks about the past:

The essay reminds me to be thankful that my Dad decided to stay here in the Philippines despite the migration of almost all our relatives to the U.S. I am thankful that necessity has not provoked my family to migrate yet.

The essay mentioned by the student is a reading selection taken up in class, namely, "Dear Country" by Bino Realuyo.

Sometimes, the student expresses his thoughts about his present condition:

Leaving my old campus leaves me somewhat vulnerable. I am suddenly on my own. Spoon-feeding is non-existent. Even textbooks are hard to get hold of. I am not walking on familiar grounds anymore. It is easy to get lost occasionally. The dashes from classroom to classroom are all too unfamiliar. I am not as secure as I was before.

Some reflective essays also look into the future, such as:

The four essays are those that truly mean something to me. They are reflections of my thoughts and feelings as a writer. After 10 years, when I remember to look back and reread the essays I chose, I am sure that they will still mean something to me.

Other essays compare the students' abilities in the past to those in the present:

I have improved in my speaking abilities in English. Before, I tried to speak in Tagalog almost all the time; but now, I try my best to speak in English.

However, the essays show that purely experiential passages are seldom evident. Rather, metacognitive experience is coupled with cognitive knowledge of person, task and strategy.

The person variable is shown in reflections on how students learn individually. One student writes that the English Language Laboratory sessions enabled him to get a high score in his first essay and to commit fewer errors. Hence, he feels he has progressed in his writing.

Another reflection refers to the stages of the process approach of writing as the reason behind his "exceptional" improvement in writing:

I was able to overcome these writing weaknesses because I followed the right way of writing in the pre-writing stage when I made a thesis statement, then an outline.

The student attributes his improvement to "extensive and intensive writing". After three months of writing, he says he made fewer errors.

Another reflection cites an awareness of the importance of craft over content through the English One course:

I found out that I was more focused on what to say rather than how to be correct in saying it. I also discovered my own unique style as a writer.

In relation to this statement, another student attributes her mastery of craft to constant practice and polish:

The English One class has been a ground for learning and polishing. This was when I realized that writing cannot survive with passion alone. We need to practice and learn from our own mistakes. Only then can we master our craft.

Several students reflect on their personal struggles to "think out of the box":

While writing my argumentative essay, I had to see all sides of the topic before I made my stand. . . defending my stand and countering other arguments entailed critical thinking. It helped me look beyond the given and think "out of the box", so to speak.

Another student writes about his perseverance in overcoming what he calls the “writer’s block”:

Writing the introduction is probably the most formidable task for me or for any writer, for that matter. There were many times in class when I'd be stuck trying to write the introduction of my essay for half the time, but I felt the will to persevere to move on and not give up. I was able to break through my writer's block and into the writing zone.

Some reflections, however, are not as optimistic. One student documents his frustrations in writing:

Most of the time, it takes me too long to compose my ideas and put (them) into writing. There are times when I can write much about something, but there are also times when I feel I can't find the right words to express myself. I've been trying to improve . . . by reading books and novels, but unfortunately the results do not show up very quickly.

Another reflective passage shows the realization of the importance of guidance in the writing process:

I have always believed that one should write with passion and now, I have learned that while passion is important, I should also remind myself to do my work guided by instruction.

Some students also note some positive improvements they had in the reading process, such as discernment of the difference between fact and opinion or the ability to adjust one’s reading comprehension to different types of text and to use appropriate vocabulary in expressing their insights:

As grown-ups, not only are we able to read but also to read through the author's mind. I have discovered that I ask myself questions whenever I read something. Why? How? As a result, the text has nothing to hide from me.

Students also compare their reading abilities before and after the course. While some of them acknowledge that in the past, reading long texts was as tedious as taking an examination, now they find it easy and enjoyable.

Knowledge of task is also one of the variables in cognitive knowledge. This is manifested in the students’ reflections that mention specific tasks done.

In accomplishing the reading tasks, the students reflect on the reading process:

This class trained my classmates and me to look beyond the words and comprehend what (they) meant. We did not just look on the surface, we dived into the text, so that we could reach the knowledge and information the writer wants to say.

Another reader mentions how he did skimming and scanning:

I learned to read longer essays and texts without missing important ideas (at) a faster pace.

Getting the main idea was also one task that the students reflected upon:

I see to it that in reading, I would be able to get the main idea of a piece I am reading; then, I go down to its minor details. Being able to get the main idea enables me to focus more, thus understand the topic better.

Critical reading is defined as the ability to read between the lines and beyond the text. The students learn to formulate questions and infer conclusions from an article. Critical reading also aids in their recall.

Another task mentioned by the students is schema building. One student says the task helps her internalize her learning process. It “consciously/unconsciously instilled lessons in my heart and mind”. She also learned to be open-minded to other ideas that are significant in reaching her goals.

Outlining and paraphrasing are tasks that the students mention in order to comprehend English texts critically. The students say when they learned to use these “two tools”, they felt they learned how to take a short cut in understanding the texts better.

In writing, the merits of knowing the task of outlining are also deemed significant:

I learned the correct way of outlining. Before, I used to disregard writing outlines because I thought it was a waste of time. But I found it very useful when I started (writing) my major essays. It really serves as a guide.

Another student writes how outlines help in organizing her thoughts:

I was able to expand my ideas and elaborate on certain points. I was able to emphasize the thought that I wanted to say by giving sentences that support it.

The task of peer-editing is mentioned by several students as contributory to their becoming critical readers: “Not only are we looking for slip-ups of the writers, we are actually challenged to find a way to enrich their essays.”

Writing reflective essays is a task done to assess the student’s progress from the beginning to the end of the course. It enables him to “reflect on my past mistakes and follow the proper steps in correcting them.”

Another task that is considered significant by the students is writing summaries. Through this task, students say they are able to pinpoint the major ideas and organize them as well. One student says he becomes more careful in revising – taking note of grammar, word choice and paragraph spacing.

Another student reflection mentions the task of free-writing as helpful:

I learned to write . . . everything that came into my mind without first giving a thought to proper grammar. By doing this, I am able to fully concentrate on the topic at hand instead of being distracted by possible errors in grammar.

The process approach to writing is again regarded as contributory to their learning even though “it’s quite tedious to keep on revising and rewriting my composition. I believe the end result is worth all the trouble. Writing all those drafts has really improved the quality of my papers.”

The pre-writing activities which are part of the process approach prove helpful to the students since these activities allow them to pinpoint which ideas are best suited to the essays. In fact, all the steps – pre-writing, outlining, writing the three drafts – are mentioned as resulting in a clear and organized essay.

In general, the freshmen students recognize certain reading and writing tasks as valuable tools for learning. They reflect on their merits and the role they play in improving their writing abilities. The realization that these tasks are necessary and contributory to their improvement is clearly articulated in their reflective essays.

Of the cognitive variables found in the students’ reflections, the most evident are the strategy variables. The latter consist of techniques the students learn to use in planning, monitoring and evaluating their work.

In reading, some students prepare to read the text by consulting the dictionary. One mentions the latter as an invaluable tool in reading comprehension; another says he can understand the text “though sometimes tricky, with the help of context clues.” Skimming and scanning the text also prove to be good strategies for the student reader. He is able to get an idea of the topic before he engages in slow reading and analysis.

In writing, one student says he thinks and decides the contents of the introduction, body and conclusion of his work, before he starts writing. At this stage, the use of outlines in pre-writing helps in the planning and organization of the composition. Two students mention the element of time in writing as a challenge that leads to improvement. They say that writing under time-pressure is not a stumbling-block:

I do poorly in thinking about ideas/subjects that I have to write about. I also write slowly because ideas do not come easily. The time pressure that I have to deal with in this class made me improve on this problem.

The students also employ varied techniques in monitoring their work. One student realizes the value of reconstruction: “I know I still can reconstruct some sentences in better ways by using a variety of words and discussing more complicated subject matter.”

Continuous revision of the drafts is mentioned as a good technique for monitoring the students’ writing, improving their skills, and correcting grammatical errors. One student affirms: “I was able to correct my own mistakes through the critical and analytical skills which I developed in the course.”

In the process of revision, two students write that putting their papers through a period of “gestation” is a good strategy. According to them, they gain a new perspective and read them again as if it were for the first time. After this period, they say they are able to identify the mistakes they made and correct them.

Two other strategies used by some students to monitor their work are rationalizing and analyzing. According to them, there is a borderline between what they think and how they feel. Hence, “being just and fair in presenting different aspects of a certain topic is a major factor for a work to be more effective and the reader more believable.”

Self-editing is another technique mentioned by several students as very effective for pinpointing their weaknesses in writing. They realize that development and improvement are still needed in this area. One student tries to discover the reasons behind her weaknesses:

I still need to develop supporting ideas for my topic sentences. Sometimes, I am not able to write what I really want to express due to lack of vocabulary knowledge.

On the other hand, students see the positive points of their work through self-editing: "The ideas were clearly established due to appropriate supporting details. The choice of words was also appropriate."

One student realizes that a good paper needs more than just "flawless grammar." Another says she was able to overcome her difficulty of running out of words. Through self-editing, she was able to describe each detail effectively by using the right words.

Another technique mentioned by the students for monitoring is using the criterion of truth: "You should always be true to yourself. Your essays must show the real you and reflect your personality."

Learning to focus is also a strategy mentioned by some writers as useful in monitoring their work: "I have learned to choose a specific concept and expand (it) from that point in order to achieve coherence."

Some students pinpoint the use of references as a useful technique, especially in writing the argumentative essay. Through this technique, the students are able to formulate significant ideas and concepts to support their arguments. These references may reinforce or debunk their insights in the essay. Thus, the practice can develop their critical thinking and encourage them to read more.

Finally, the students are able to evaluate themselves through metacognitive techniques. One significant strategy is the use of comparison and contrast. They are able to compare their abilities through their diagnostic essays at the beginning and at the end of the course. Some observations of a student are: "The structure of my first essay was incoherent. Ideas were dangling from one paragraph to another." For his second essay, the student says, "The work did not turn out as I planned. It did not reach my expectations."

Another student points out his lapses in grammar, disharmony of ideas and redundancy. The student also mentions that he has trouble organizing his ideas.

One student evaluates his ability to write as "low" because he has a hard time planning and is at a loss for words. In another reflection, a student admits that he suffers from a lack of motivation to write, especially if he is not interested in the topic or does not comprehend the given situation.

In his first reflective essay, one student says that he writes the way he talks. The earlier essays "show weaknesses in terms of structure, order of ideas and sentences."

Another student says she uses flowery language in her earlier essays and lacks "proper decorum" to effectively deliver messages to preferred audiences.

However, at the end of the course, students evaluate their improvements in their second and third reflective essays, particularly in grammar. Some grammatical points mentioned are as follows: subject-verb agreement, use of "cope with" instead of "cope up with", and other errors. Improvements are also noted in organization and sequencing of ideas, use of transitional devices, and parallel sentence structures. The students mention brevity and directness in their essays at the end of the course. According to them, they are able to write better introductions and conclusions. Some students say their styles improved, and they learned to write more formally. More importantly, they say they have learned self-editing and peer editing. They are more aware of role, purpose, and audience in writing.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study attempts to show evidence of metacognitive ability among English One students of De La Salle University-Manila. From their reflective essays in the portfolios, it is evident that their metacognitive knowledge is both experiential and cognitive. The most outstanding variable in their cognitive knowledge is strategy, and students' reflections show ample evidence of planning, monitoring and evaluating their work.

Through these strategies, particularly the evaluative techniques, students show awareness of their own improvements or progress. This is documented in the diagnostic essays at the beginning and at the end of the course. Some specific realizations of their weaknesses and strengths and the changes that they underwent are articulated. The nature of some reading and writing tasks is described, as were the methods they adopted to effectively accomplish them. Through the course, the students developed their own techniques to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning.

However, one significant finding in this study on metacognitive thinking is the ability and facility of the students to do reflective thinking or writing even without previous training. English One teachers do not consciously provide this training like the ones employed by Plata (2005) and by Borromeo (1998).

One factor that may account for their facility to do reflective thinking despite the lack of consistent training is their developing linguistic proficiency. It is a fact that the students use English as a second language in the academic setting or as a first language in some homes or immediate environments. Their facility with the language may translate into their ability to express their reflections in writing.

The task of reflective thinking may also have been developed through the practice of some English One teachers, who require their students to keep journals. The journals serve as part of their minor (or low stakes) writing. Through these journals, students are trained to habitually reflect on their daily tasks, such as the ones mentioned in the study of Plata (2005). The journals provide the students with a venue for self-expression without fearing censorship or evaluation from their teachers. The teachers may give qualitative comments but do not assign a grade equivalent for these journals.

The reflective essays in their portfolios are also valuable tools for self-evaluation. The students assess what they perceive as good, what can be improved upon, and what is appropriate to their learning. Assessment helps them to constructively evaluate how well they learn. According to Valencia (1990) (in Dolak (2004)), when learners are engaged in assessment, they develop essential life skills that enable them to reflect on and understand their areas of strengths and weaknesses.

Through the portfolio assessment, they have a voice in their evaluation. Thus, learners and educators become partners in this collaborative process (Dolak, 2004).

However, to further improve the students' metacognitive skills and critical thinking, conscious training may prove beneficial. Aside from the prompts that the students respond to at the beginning and at the end of the course, students may be given guide questions to periodically assess their work after writing their major essays or their minor compositions.

Some questions that may be asked of the students are as follows:

- (1) Why did you select this topic for your composition?
- (2) What was most important to you while you were writing this essay?
- (3) What obstacles did you struggle with?
- (4) If you could work on this further, what would you change?
- (5) What were some of the reactions you received from your peer editor/teacher?
- (6) How is this composition similar or different from other essays you have written?

To further hone the students' skills in assessing their reading/writing abilities, some questions may serve as guidelines, such as:

- (1) What are your strengths and weaknesses as a writer/reader?
- (2) What have you learned as a writer/reader?
- (3) What are your future goals as a writer/reader?
- (4) What do you think people will learn about you from your writing?

(Adapted from Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991)

As student involvement and awareness of their own work grow, students also grow more mature in their decisions about the contents of their portfolios. Student assessments begin to be more systematic; they become more aware of their work and are able to pinpoint specific improvements.

However, one goal that is still to be met by the students is the integration of all the elements of their portfolios to form a composite picture of themselves. With the attainment of this goal, teachers can compare their views with those of their students and try to reconcile differences to come up with a more holistic picture. The quantitative scores of the teachers gained from quizzes and other exercises can complement the qualitative picture drawn by the students of themselves to obtain a more objective and authentic assessment.

Finally, further research may investigate the complementary nature of portfolio assessment with the more traditional forms of assessment. The use of one may not necessarily exclude the other. Another research may look into the elaboration of relevant, self-reflective sheets and standard-referenced descriptive scales. The self-reflective sheets may provide documentation, comparison and integration of the data within the portfolio, and links may be made among them. Simon and Forgette-Giroux (2000) suggest that the scales present clear and relevant rubrics that tie in closely with the entry selection criteria. Such initiatives may establish clearer guidelines for portfolio practice in the classroom.

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